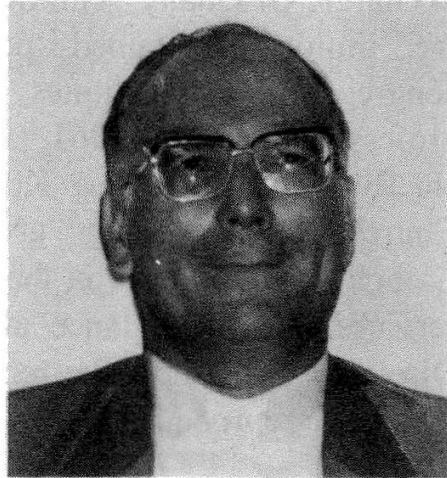


Old and New Challenges for the Hong Kong Catholic Church

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Christian faith tells us that God continuously operates through the events and happenings of every day life. To understand the messages God is sending us, we must pay close attention to the “signs of the time”. In the last 50 years, the Catholic Church in Hong Kong has had to confront many historically challenging situations. Now Hong Kong is called to deal with what may be its most significant challenge: the end of the colonial era and its return to the motherland. In this essay, we will examine how the Church in Hong Kong has met some of its past challenges and how it is now preparing to meet those of the future.



Past Challenges

“Chinese refugees”

The end of the Second World War in 1945 also signaled the end of Hong Kong’s four years of Japanese occupation. The Church was reduced to few personnel and scarce resources. It had, so to speak, to start all over again. The people, who through hunger or despair, had been forced to leave Hong Kong were now returning. Along with these former Hong Kong residents, endless queues of refugees, caught in China’s political upheaval and natural disasters, were daily crossing the China border into the colony. (By 1961, the population of Hong Kong, which had numbered no more than half a million in 1945, had risen to more than three million.) The Church

energetically put its facilities and whatever personnel it had to the service of these people. At first, the church provided the basic means of survival. Gradually, however, it opened up social welfare centres, schools and chapels to answer the people's material and spiritual needs. Initially, the services were temporary and casual, without much coordination. They were concentrated chiefly around the centres and the churches, and left almost exclusively to the initiative of the people in charge. Gradually, with the benefit of experience and support, and the influx of trained personnel from the various religious congregations and institutes, the services became more specialized and professional. From 1961, these social services were coordinated chiefly by Caritas-Hong Kong. This official organ of the Catholic Church of Hong Kong grew and helped to develop the present Catholic commitments in the fields of education, medicine and social services. A quick glance at the official statistics of the Catholic Directory will show the remarkable dimensions of these endeavors. (Statistics reproduced on p. 7).

The Challenge of "Vatican II and the Local Church"

The challenges for the Church of Hong Kong did not come solely from the changes taking place in society. The Church at this time was experiencing a burst of energy that moved it towards a renewal of its life and mission. Following the end of the war, the Hong Kong Catholic Church had to face a basic restructuring. For many years it had been considered a mission territory but in April 1946 it had been elevated to the status of a diocese. Within a few years people everywhere began to notice new currents of fresh air blowing within the Church all over the world. This raised high expectations which eventually were channeled into the enthusiastic response of the Second Vatican Council. The influx of refugees as well as the changes being brought about by Vatican II (1962-65) stirred up sensitive controversies.. Bishop Lawrence Bianchi, (1899-1983), of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions then bishop of the diocese, moved by sincerity and charity, tried to balance conservative with progressive tendencies. He encouraged the use of social service methods suited to the needs of the new settlers.

Educational and Social Service Institutions of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong

Education Institutions: Schools and Students

Kindergartens	39	14,062 students
Primary	154	118,030 "
Secondary and Middle	77	82,939 "
Vocational/Commercial	18	9,296 "
Adult Education	26	62,406 "
Evening	5	2,219 "
Special	8	652 "

Out of a total of 289,604 students, 21,635 are Catholics (7.47%)

Out of a total of 10,888 lay teachers, 3,265 are Catholic (29.43%).

Social and Charitable Services

Social Centres	14	
Hospitals	6	132,284 patient beds)
Clinics and Out patients Depts.	14	1,060,874
Nursery and Child Care Centres	17	2,583 children
Hostels for girls	4	300 residents
Residential Homes for the Elderly	11	927 inmates
Centres for Care of the Elderly	13	5,439 helped
Hostels and Lodges	10	78,094 boarders
Rehabilitation Service Centres	14	1,001 helped

(From Hong Kong Catholic Church Directory, 1996, p. 554)

To those who objected that the methods being used could result in so-called "rice Christians", he pointed out: "It might be so with this generation but their children will be better formed!". He showed deep sensitivity to the new changes suggested by Vatican II, whose sessions he was attending. Consequently he urged everybody to implement the liturgical reforms, to use the Chinese language in the liturgy and to have a Chinese translation of the Bible. (The Franciscan Fathers of the *Studium Biblicum* completed the translation in 1969.) He was instrumental in the renewal of diocesan catechesis (the Catechetical Center was opened in 1963), and the reorganization of the local Church. He soon became convinced of the necessity of having a strong local church. For this purpose, he first needed a Chinese priest as Auxiliary Bishop. In 1969, he submitted his resignation in order to hand over the direction of the diocese to the first local bishop, Bishop Francis Hsu Cheng-Pin (1920-1973), his auxiliary.

Bishop Hsu quickly realized that the Council's new trends had to be assimilated by the greatest possible number of Catholics. Therefore in view of overhauling the diocesan commitments in the light of Vatican II and to follow the Vatican II guidelines for making plans for the future, he decided to call a Diocesan Convention. The Convention was held from 1970 to 1971. It involved more than 400 clergy and lay-people. Divided into eleven groups, these participants reflected and exchanged views on evangelization, liturgy and the sacraments, religious instruction, school and education, laity, clergy, religious institutes and personnel, social apostolate, mass media, ecumenism and diocesan administration.

Bishop Hsu's plan to strengthen the role of the Church in Hong Kong's social issues and to foster good relationships with the other neighboring churches quickly gained momentum. Unfortunately, all his work was interrupted by his sudden death in May 1973. The term of his successor, Bishop Peter Lei Wang-Kei (1922-1974), was short. Bishop Lei was installed on 22 April 1974 and died on 23 July of the same year. This impeded the quick implementation of the diocesan plans.

New Challenges

Preparing for the challenge of 1997

Only with the election of Bishop Wu Cheng-Chung (Cardinal from 1988) as bishop in April 1975, could the diocese more systematically face the new challenges deriving from both the life of the Church and from social changes.

The renewal of the Christian life and diocesan restructuring have been Cardinal Wu's main concerns. First, he divided the diocese into three areas, each with an Episcopal Vicar, and created new parishes in order to answer the spiritual needs of the new residents of the satellite-cities which were quickly being constructed. Then, he reorganized the central offices in the new Diocesan Centre (1978). He fostered the publication of the Pastoral Handbook (1982); he named an Episcopal Vicar for Education (1985), etc. In this rearrangement process, he took special care to have better employment conditions for the local personnel, in view of a greater "localization" of the Church.

The Church in Hong Kong has tried to face new circumstances and the urgency of the preparation for the future, with courage and farsightedness.

But Hong Kong's dramatic social and political changes during the 1980s could not absorb the full attention of Cardinal Wu and the whole Catholic community. In late 1978, Mainland China, with its new policy of liberalization and of economic reforms, was reopening to the outside world and the issue of the future of the Hong Kong Colony had been laid on the negotiations desk of Great Britain and China. This culminated in the Joint Declaration in 1984.

Due to Hong Kong's "bridge" position these events presented the local Church with new challenges: which role to play in the ever growing contacts with China and with the Church in China, and how to prepare adequately for the return of Hong Kong to the motherland in 1997. This would take place in a climate of concern and mistrust registered among a large segment of the population.

The Church in Hong Kong has tried to face new circumstances and the urgency of the preparation for the future, with courage and farsightedness. The life of its people has focused more sharply on their Christian mission and commitment. For new initiatives to better favor the "bridge role" of the Hong Kong Church with the Church in China and its "mission of reconciliation", a few diocesan institutions have undergone some adjustment.

The document that incorporated this new surge is the Pastoral Exhortation "March into the Bright Decade: the Pastoral Commitment of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong," issued by Cardinal Wu on May 14, 1989. The emphasis was on the necessity of maturing in faith by living the Christian mission and by experiencing communion, mainly within "small communities of faith". The efforts to build up these small communities had to go hand in hand with the improvement of diocesan services in other sectors, such as the mass communication media, education, social welfare, the ongoing formation of clergy and religious personnel, and the relationship with China.

At the grass roots, however, Hong Kong people were increasingly losing trust in the future and, therefore, planning different solutions. The main options, shared by the ordinary Hong Kong citizens and by Catholics, were the following:

- build up a positive "cooperative and workable relationship" with the future government and political power,
- acquiesce passively to the political will of the supreme authorities (a combination of hope and worry, a fatalism on the alert),
- try to mold a solid institutional basis and a strong personal formation to be able to carry out the formulae "one country, two systems", and "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong",
- finally, the last but a rather popular solution, emigration.

The Catholic authorities of Hong Kong in order to overcome the sense of mistrust and to get more positively ready for the future seem to have taken the third option: to have a greater involvement and more direct participation in public affairs and in Hong Kong's socio-political issues.

Cardinal Wu began a series of interventions, starting with the Declaration of the Catholic Church on the future of Hong Kong (August 15, 1984): the purpose was to clarify the Catholic position

and expectations, some time before the Sino-British Joint Declaration was to be signed (September 26, 1984). Other interventions followed exhorting the Catholic community to study the Joint Declaration carefully and to take an active part in the elections taking place at various levels, beginning in 1985. The guidelines of the diocesan curia issued ten years later in August 15, 1995, stated "In order that the faithful may receive adequate formation, parishes and Church organizations should, as far as possible, organize talks and seminars on the social teachings of the Catholic Church, on the political system of Hong Kong and on social analysis". During the second half of 1996, other guidelines were provided for participation in the Selection Committee of the Chief Executive and of the Provisional Legislature.

In the meantime, the suggestions of the Pastoral Exhortation "March into the Bright Decade" concerning Church life were implemented.

After a long and thorough consultation, the diocesan reorganization announced in June 1992 was gradually carried out and culminated in the very recent appointments of Joseph Zen, S.D.B., as Coadjutor Bishop and John Tong as Auxiliary Bishop. They were consecrated on December 9, 1996.

The Challenge of Filipino Domestic Workers and Vietnam Refugees

The pastoral work, in these years, met with two other great challenges: the large influx of workers from the Philippines (mainly domestic helpers), and the numerous waves of refugees from Vietnam. The ecclesiastical authorities have been doing their best to provide the Filipino nationals with adequate spiritual assistance and pastoral services, and the Vietnamese with a decent and stable settlement.

Midway into the decade, the commitments proposed by the Pastoral Exhortation "March into the Bright Decade" of 1989, were up for a re-evaluation in 1994-95.

The results show that, in these five years, the Diocese has concentrated on the formation of lay-people and on the renewal of their Christian life. Parishes and associations have been committed to this. They have trained a considerable number of leaders, and laid down a solid foundation for several "small communities of faith".

The formation of priests and religious has also received close attention, as well as the commitment to schools and education. There has been a positive contribution to the reform of the student curriculum, the use of the mother tongue, civic and moral education, etc. There have also been considerable improvement and development in the social communication field and in the production of audio-visual materials.

The Church's "servant role" in society has been enhanced by the appointment of a Vicar for Social Services, the Diocesan Commission for Hospital Pastoral Care, the Diocesan Commission for Pastoral Services to the Disabled, for Pastoral Services to Filipino, Migrants and to Vietnamese. etc..

Both the diocese and the parishes have promoted the "prophetic role" of the Church as regards social justice and peace.

The relationship between the Church in Hong Kong, and the Church in China was given considerable importance during the 1991-1992 celebration of the 150th anniversary of the presence of the church in Hong Kong. Once again the "bridge role" and the need to "walk together" were underlined. Additionally, individuals, including Cardinal Wu himself, who made three visits to China, (1985, 1986, 1994), and groups who have increased contacts with Catholic friends in China, have provided support in many different ways.

For the next five years, the Pastoral Exhortation, "Proclaim the Gospel and Spread the Kingdom of God", will continue to emphasize the two fundamental orientations that have dominated the life of the Church in Hong Kong during these preceding years: the continuation of Church commitments in the different sectors of the diocesan services, and the implementation of the "bridge role and mission of reconciliation" with the Church in China. The Holy Father and Hong Kong's geographical position have entrusted this role and mission to the Church in Hong Kong.

The "after 1997" challenge

The return of Hong Kong to China will present a new challenge for the Hong Kong Catholic Church, the challenge of proving itself a truly mature Local Church.

This maturity can be manifold:

- to be able to carry on its prophetic mission of witnessing to Christ's salvation and spreading His Gospel of love and justice in a more secularized and materialistic social environment, as well as under more difficult circumstances;
- to be able to cooperate fully in the work of evangelization and reconciliation among the Chinese people and with the Church in China, on an equal basis, without undue interference;
- to be able to keep the proper relationship with other neighboring local churches as sister churches, as well as with the Holy Father as the sign and guarantor of the universal communion and unity of the Church;
- to be able to maintain the proper autonomy and the correct cooperation with Government authorities.

Conclusion

What are the messages God is sending to the Hong Kong Catholic Church through all these old and new challenges? The answer to this question requires long and deep meditation, but, undoubtedly, these challenges can be considered both as a time of testing and as a time of grace: Christ constantly is putting his Church to the test, in order to assess its maturity as a local church, its courage in carrying on its mission and its faithfulness to Jesus and to his brothers and sisters living in Hong Kong and in China. But, during these tests, Christ does not leave his Church to struggle alone. His constant presence, experienced in dealing with the past challenges, becomes the only firm guarantee that his Church here in Hong Kong will not fail the tests it will have to undergo in the future. □